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# SOAR Medical Summary Report (MSR) Summer Writing Camp

Presented by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services  
Administration (SAMHSA)  
SOAR Technical Assistance (TA) Center  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

August 28, 2019



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# Webinar Instructions

- Muting
- Recording availability
- Downloading documents
- Questions and Answers

# Purpose and Objectives

- Why it's important to include an MSR with your SOAR-assisted SSI/SSDI application.
- What information is relevant to key sections of the MSR.
- How to write quality MSRs and get them reviewed with feedback prior to SSA submission.

# Agenda

## Presenters

- Dan Coladonato, Project Associate, SAMHSA SOAR TA Center, Policy Research Associates, Inc., Delmar, New York
- Jennifer Ankton, Disability Adjudication Supervisor, Nevada Bureau of Disability Adjudication, Las Vegas, Nevada
- Shaun Kostiuik, MBA, Client Financial Services Manager and SOAR Local Lead, Pittsburgh Mercy, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

## Questions and Answers

- Facilitated by the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center

# Welcome!

Mark P. Jacobson, Ph. D.  
Office of Program Analysis and Coordination  
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Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services  
Administration

August 28, 2019



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# MSR Overview and New Findings on It's Effectiveness!

Dan Coladonato  
Project Associate  
SAMHSA SOAR Technical Assistance Center  
Policy Research Associates, Inc.

August 28, 2019



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# Medical Summary Report (MSR)

- The MSR is a letter which describes the individual and their limitations in functioning
  - Supports medical records submitted
  - Provides a clear link between an applicant's conditions and functional limitations
  - Often takes place of the SSA-3373 Function Report
  - Is medical evidence when co-signed by an Acceptable Medical Source
  - Can be sent directly to the DDS examiner or hand delivered to SSA
- Answers the question: "Can the person work and earn SGA?"

# Medical Summary Report Interview Guide and Template

- Tool for gathering information needed to write the MSR
- Open-ended questions
  - Tell me about ...
  - How often ...
  - When was the last time ...
- Questions about functional limitations
  - Context of questions – SGA
  - Distinguish between access and ability
- Use the MSR Template to organize and write the MSR



## Medical Summary Report Interview Guide and Template

*For applications filed on or after January 17, 2017*

The *Medical Summary Report (MSR) Interview Guide* provides sample questions and guidance for gathering information necessary to the SSI/SSDI disability determination process. We do not expect you to ask all of the questions in each section. The questions are intended to help you gather all of the information you will need to write a Medical Summary Report. For example, if the individual has not been in military service, there is no need to include a military history section. Likewise, if the individual has no legal issues, do not include a legal history section.

Using this guidance, SOAR-trained providers are able to gather a thorough history in a respectful manner, which in turn helps the Disability Determination Services (DDS) understand the duration of a person's impairment and the effect of their illness(es) on work ability and functioning. The *MSR Template* may be used to compile information in the form of a narrative letter to SSA/DDS as part of the SOAR process. The template has eight main sections, covering the types of information that DDS needs to make a decision. Use the headings provided in the template to organize your MSR.

### Trauma-Informed Interviewing

How questions are asked can be critical to obtaining the appropriate information. It is important to be sensitive to influences that affect a person's ability and willingness to provide information (cultural factors, past experiences with the mental health system, etc.). The interviewing process can also uncover sensitive topics like past and current trauma that need to be approached with care. When asking about trauma, it is critical to not overwhelm the applicant. It is equally important that the person be safe and secure after leaving the interview. Gathering such personal information requires a sensitive and skilled interviewer.



**SOAR Tip:** Interviewers who feel uncomfortable or ill-equipped to explore certain topics should not do so. Instead, they should seek assistance from someone who is more clinically skilled and more able to assess responses, to ensure that the person is safe from self-harm and/or emotional distress when the interview ends.

## Tips for Writing

- Collect medical records after releases of information are signed
- Go through medical records and organize in chronological order
- Set aside blocks of time to begin writing the report with no interruptions
- Sit down with all information -- medical records, intake packet, completed MSR Interview Guide (personal, medical, employment, and substance use history) and any current mental status exams

# Components of the MSR

- Reference Section
- Introduction
- Personal History (Personal, Educational, Legal)
- Occupational History
- Substance Use History
- Physical Health History
- Psychiatric History
- Functional Information
- Summary
- Contact Information

Tips on what to include for each component is provided on the following slides!



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## Introduction Section

- Demographics
- Physical description – hygiene, grooming, dress, make-up, any unique characteristics
- Include diagnoses and impairment information
- Help the DDS examiner “see” the individual as you do!

# Personal History

- Childhood and family information
  - Brief overview of their background
  - Past trauma that may relate to current diagnoses and functioning
- Education
  - What was the last grade they completed?
  - Any struggles or symptoms of diagnoses in school?
- Legal History
  - Brief overview of legal history
  - Any connections between symptoms and contacts with police?
  - Any treatment while incarcerated?

## Employment History

- Describe past jobs – include how long they stayed at each job, the tasks they performed, any struggles they had at work, and why they left.
- How can you connect their difficulties in maintaining work to their symptoms and health conditions?
- Quotes from the applicant and the employer
- Overview of military service (if applicable)

# Substance Use and Co-Occurring Disorders

- If substance use is deemed "material" to a person's disability, benefits will be denied
- The determination does NOT require sobriety
- Substance use is "material" when:
  - If a person were clean and sober, the functional impairment would not exist and the person would not be disabled
- Use past periods of sobriety (hospital, jail, treatment) to document symptoms that persisted

## Physical and Psychiatric Health Treatment

- Diagnoses and chronological treatment history
- Specific quotes from the applicant or record that illustrate symptoms
- Observations of behavior
- Durational issues
- Current mental status exam

## Information about Functional Limitations

- Address all four areas of mental functioning
- Discuss any effects or side effects of medication
- Describe any supports the applicant receives and compare with lack of support



# Areas of Mental Functioning

- Understand, remember, or apply information
  - Memory, following instructions, solving problems, etc.
- Interact with others
  - Getting along with others, anger, avoidance, etc.
- Concentrate, persist, or maintain pace
  - Task completion, focusing on details, distractibility at work, etc.
- Adapt or manage oneself
  - Hygiene, responding to change, setting realistic goals, etc.

Activities of Daily Living will be considered throughout all areas!



## Summary and Contact Information

- Ties all information together for a concise picture of the individual
- Contact information – names and numbers
- Co-signed by case worker and an Acceptable Medical Source:
  - Physicians or Licensed PhD/PsyD Psychologists
  - Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs)
    - This includes: Certified Nurse Midwife, Nurse Practitioner, Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist, and Clinical Nurse Specialist.
  - Physician Assistants
  - Audiologists

# MSR Samples and Support

## **Anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders**

Sample including anxiety and depression

## **Depressive, bipolar, and related disorders**

Sample including Bipolar Disorder

Sample including Bipolar Disorder (youth)

## **Schizophrenia spectrum and other psychotic disorders**

Sample including Schizophrenia

Sample including Schizoaffective Disorder

## **Personality and impulse-control disorders**

Sample including Personality Disorder

Sample including Avoidant Personality Disorder and Depression

## **Neurodevelopmental disorders**

Sample including Borderline Intellectual Functioning

## **Trauma- and stressor-related disorders**

Sample including PTSD and anxiety

Sample including PTSD (youth)

## **Reapplication for benefits after incarceration**

Sample for Reapplication

# Visit the SOAR website for MSR samples

The SAMHSA SOAR TA  
Center will review  
redacted MSR letters  
and provide feedback  
upon request

# The Effectiveness of the Medical Summary Report

Use of the SOAR critical components, including the Medical Summary Report (MSR), statistically increases the likelihood of an approval and reduces the days to decision on initial application.

- Based on the analysis of 22,808 applications tracked in OAT over the last 10 years.
- Applications with an MSR were more likely to be approved. ( $p < .001$ )
- Having a co-signature on the MSR increased the approval rate by 13 percentage points.

# MSRs from a Disability Determination Services Perspective

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August 28, 2019



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## Factors Relevant to DDS

- For the disability adjudicator, a well written MSR should provide a brief summary of the claimant's medical impairments and how the impairments inhibit their ability to perform work related tasks.
- Key components the DDS reviewer is considering in review of the MSR:
  - What is the medical diagnosis and how established?
  - Has the claimant received any treatment?
  - What type of treatment and response?
  - How does the claimant's condition affect their ability to function?

# Medical Evidence

The summary of evidence outlined in the MSR should be supported by the objective medical findings to include the signs and laboratory findings that establish the medically determinable impairment or MDI.

- Signs are defined as the anatomical, physiological or psychological abnormalities that are observable such as gait disturbance, limited mobility, abnormal behaviors and moods, deficits in memory or orientation.
- Laboratory findings are defined as one or more anatomical, physiological or psychological phenomena that is evident in diagnostic testing such as medical imaging (X-rays, MRI), EEGs, ECGs, blood test and psychological testing.

# Treatment History

- The MSR should provide some details of past and current treatment showing the longitudinal effects of the claimant's impairment.
- Reports of treatment should be relevant to the impairments alleged.
- Pertinent treatment history should include medications, mental and physical therapy, hospitalizations, frequent ER visits and surgical intervention.
- Statements regarding the response to and/or changes in treatment and side effects related to treatment can be useful in the reviewer's assessment.

# The Importance of Functional Information (Physical)

Functional information is a significant factor in assessing the severity of one's condition. Collateral information provided in the MSR is typically a true reflection of the claimant's limitations.

Key functional information to include for physical impairments:

- Difficulties in standing and walking for a length of time
- Weight restrictions in lifting and carrying
- Limitations in bending, stooping or kneeling
- Limitations in hand function, decreased strength, weakness, difficulty grasping.  
Ex. difficulty with buttons, zippers or picking up objects such as a coin.
- How long does it take them to complete certain tasks such as cooking and chores?

# The Importance of Functional Information (Mental)

Key functional information to include for mental impairments:

- Difficulty with attention and concentration.
- Do they need encouragement to complete tasks such as personal care?
- Are they able to follow written and oral instructions?
- Do they have difficulty with getting along with others? Are they Isolative?
- How do they respond to stress or changes in their environment?

## How is the MSR Beneficial to DDS?

- The MSR may assist the adjudicative team in determining the next appropriate action leading to an expedient and accurate determination.
- May provide the supporting collateral information that is missing from other medical and non medical findings.
- Can provide a more accurate assessment of functioning.

# Winning MSR Tips and Tricks!

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August 28, 2019



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## So You Want to Write an MSR?

- Congratulations! All you need to do is follow the rules...
- Rule #1: Don't get overwhelmed!
- Rule #2: Refer to Rule #1
- If you ignore Rule #1, just remember- only good things can result from an MSR!
- Many of us are case workers, who may not have been English and Journalism majors!

## Tips on Writing Key MSR Sections

- **Personal History** – Less is more! Only include relevant info.
- **Physical Health History** – 1 sentence if this is unremarkable.
- **Substance Use History** – Be honest. Highlight period of sobriety and Substance Use Disorder (SUD) treatment.
- **Work History** – Highlight on the job difficulties *and* barriers to getting to the job, if applicable.
- **Functional Areas** – Give succinct examples of marked to extreme limitations where applicable. It only takes 2 marked or 1 extreme!

## Let's Take Trip to a Case Study: David

- David is a 27 year-old, single white male
- Diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder and Generalized Anxiety Disorder/Social Phobia with a very limited treatment history
- Sister was very supportive
- MSR was *not* signed by an “acceptable medical source”
- MSR was heavy on observation and examples
- David was approved for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits in 54 days!
- No Consultative Examination (CE)
- Social Security Administration (SSA) agreed with alleged onset date (\$11,200 retroactive benefits)

## Let's Take Trip to a Case Study: Keith

- Keith is a 60 year-old, single white male
- Diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder, Incipient Presenile Dementia, and Alcohol Use Disorder, severe, in remission
- Significant full-time work history and work was above Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA)
- First encounter with medical treatment was January 2017
- MSR was co-signed by his treating physician
- Keith was approved for SSDI benefits in 57 days, no CE
- \$1,881/month. 1<sup>st</sup> payment 2 months post-approval

## Things Not To Do

- Do not jeopardize your credibility.
  - Avoid giving your opinion. This is a report, not an editorial.
  - Never embellish or exaggerate
- Do not ask every question on the interview guide!
- Do not leave out quotes!
- Do not give unnecessary details – being succinct is effective.
- Do not try to be too technical.
- Do not stare at a blank screen if you are stuck!

## Things To Remember

- When in doubt, focus on the person's functioning.
- Refer to the SSA Blue Book.
- There are TONS of resources available in the toolkit.
- This is your opportunity to share what is not in a record.
- These aren't meant to be done in 1 sitting!
- Share everything that demonstrates functional limitations.
- Talk to other supports, family, or staff for more information.

## Questions and Answers

Please type your questions into the Q&A box on the right of your screen

# Thank You

SAMHSA's mission is to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America's communities.

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